



STATEMENT

BY



**CMSGT (RET.) MICHAEL PARENTE
INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT
AIR FORCE SERGEANTS ASSOCIATION**

FOR THE

**JOINT HEARING OF THE HOUSE AND SENATE VETERANS
AFFAIRS COMMITTEES**

ON

FY 2003 VETERANS AFFAIRS PRIORITIES

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AIR FORCE SERGEANTS ASSOCIATION

5211 Auth Road, Suitland, Maryland 20746

(800) 638-0594 or (301) 899-3500

E-mail: staff@afsahq.org Home Page: www.afsahq.org

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished committee members, thank you for this opportunity to present what the Air Force Sergeants Association (AFSA) and those it represents believe should be among your Fiscal Year 2003 priorities for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Your committees have always served in a singularly nonpartisan way to act as the conscience of this nation in ensuring that our veterans are viewed as a vital national resource rather than a financial burden. Building on the great successes and advancements you



achieved last year, we ask you to continue the momentum in caring for those who serve.

Today, we face a very different world than we did one year ago when we testified before this joint hearing. We are at war. Military members are once again in harm's way. Active duty, Guard, and Reserve members have dropped their personal comforts for the duration of Operations Enduring Freedom and Noble Eagle. The focus of their lives has shifted, at least for a time, exclusively toward carrying the fight for this nation's citizens. Because of this change . . . because of the full mobilization of the military instrument of national defense . . . your deliberations become even more important.

Today, I wish to comment on some of the concerns we receive from our members in letters, phone calls, and during field visits. AFSA and its 135,000 members represent those who are currently serving, those veterans who have reached retirement, and those who have simply separated -- in all components of the Air Force. This nation's response for service should be based on certain principles that this association urges these committees to use as a guide during your deliberations. These imperatives provide an underlying foundation to make decision affecting this nation's veterans.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. PROVIDE A SOLID TRANSITION BACK INTO SOCIETY. This country owes its veterans dignified, transitional, recovery assistance. . . not based on rank or status, but simply because they served in the most lethal of professions to protect this nation.

2. ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT MOST VETERANS ARE ENLISTED. Enlisted veterans served with lower pay, generally re-entered the civilian populace with non-transferrable military skills, probably had relatively little civilian education, and served in skills that are less marketable. Certainly, "a vet is a vet," but for enlisted veterans we must factor in their unique circumstances.


3. DECISIONS BASED ON MERIT -- NOT COST. Funding for our military veterans must, of course, be based on fiscal reality. However, Congress and, in turn, the VA must never make determinations simply because "the money is just not there" or because there are now "too many" veterans. Funding our military and taking care of our veterans has to be viewed as a "must pay" situation.

4. REMEMBER RESERVISTS. In Operations Enduring Freedom and Noble Eagle, reserve component members are valiantly serving, ready to sacrifice their lives if necessary. Certainly, our enlisted guardsmen and reservists are full-time players as part of the "Total Force." *Any differences between reserve component members and the full-time force, in terms of VA programs or availability of services, need to be critically examined and, where appropriate, systematically erased.*

5. **MANDATE VA TREATMENT FOR THE MALADIES OF WAR.** It is important that the commitment of our troops to combat or high-risk situations also involves an *absolute commitment to care for any malady that may have resulted from that service*. Many veterans call and write to this association about our government's denial, waffling, then reluctant recognition of illnesses caused by conditions during past conflicts. We applaud recent VA decisions that show a greater willingness to weight judgements in this regard in favor of the servicemember. We ask you to reinforce a commitment to unconditional care after service.

This statement will focus on three general areas: education, health care, and general issues that we hope you will consider as you deliberate the FY 2003 VA budget and policies.

EDUCATION

Mr. Chairman, as you know, the  Montgomery G.I. Bill is the primary educational benefit provided for those who serve. The World War II G.I. Bill facilitated the return of the "Greatest Generation" back into full membership as productive citizens. The Montgomery G.I. Bill today serves this transitional purpose, but it also has come to mean much more to those who serve. It is a symbol of this nation's commitment to military members. It is perceived by servicemembers as an "earned benefit" that this nation provides those who serve.

In recent sessions of Congress these two committees have done a wonderful job of increasing the value of the Montgomery G.I. Bill Benefit. The legislation produced in the first session of the 107th Congress has sent this benefit on a glide path to where it will be worth \$985 per month for 36 months of entitlement. We are appreciative of this effort, but still hope (as a founding member of the *Partnership for Veterans Education*) that the benefit will someday fully pay for the costs of books, tuition, and fees at an average national college or university for a commuter student. We also hope the MGIB benefit will someday be automatically indexed for inflation. We ask that you continue working toward increasing the value of this important benefit. In today's dollars, the monthly value of the benefit should be between \$1,100 and \$1,400 per month (according to the "College Board" report). In addition to continuing to increase the value of the benefit, we ask you to consider the following program enhancements which we have listed in priority order.

- Provide a Montgomery G.I. Bill (MGIB) enrollment opportunity for any currently serving military members not already in the MGIB.
- Allow military members to enroll in the MGIB later during their careers than at Basic Military Training (Boot Camp).

- Increase the current ten-year “benefit-loss” provision of the MGIB to 15 or 20 years, or repeal the “benefit-loss” provision entirely.
- Provide the “portability” (transfer all or part of a member’s MGIB benefit to family member) option to all MGIB enrollees.
- Allow new military members to use their MGIB benefit to pay off student loans.

1. *THE NEED FOR AN MGIB OPEN ENROLLMENT OPPORTUNITY*: The greatest need cited by our members is to provide a second chance for those who turned down their initial opportunity to enroll in either the Veterans Educational Assistance Program(VEAP) or the Montgomery G.I. Bill. Many turned down the VEAP program because it was a relatively insufficient, two-for-one matching program (the member contributed up to \$2,700 and the government matched up to \$5,400); also, many VEAP-era people were counseled not to enroll in VEAP since a “better” educational benefit program was on the horizon. Many thousands more have turned down the MGIB enrollment opportunity over the years – primarily because it is offered as a one-time, irrevocable decision at Basic Military Training (when their pay is at its lowest). This is a time, of course, when giving up \$100 per month for the first 12 months of one’s military career is financially impossible for many. We have been told that 1,500 to 1,800 in the Air Force alone turn down the MGIB each year, and that tens of thousands (in all services) of those serving have no educational benefit. Sadly, many military members retiring now have no transitional educational benefit.

We respectfully urge that Congress establish a limited-period opportunity for any currently serving military member to enroll in the Montgomery G.I. Bill. We would hope the cost would be \$1,200 or \$2,700 (the cost during the most recent VEAP-MGIB enrollment opportunity). However, we would estimate that a cost moderately higher than that would even be welcome considering the current value of the benefit and the opportunities that such congressional action would provide for those transitioning from the military to civilian status.

Clearly, the Montgomery G.I. Bill was an improvement over VEAP, but it was still a relatively insufficient program – not enough to pay for the full cost of classes, and it didn’t (and still doesn’t) include an inflationary adjustment mechanism. In recent times, as we said earlier, Congress has done great work in increasing the value of the MGIB. A key point, however, is that this much-more-lucrative benefit was not in existence when many turned down either VEAP or MGIB. Please work to allow those who turned down either VEAP or MGIB a chance to correct that earlier decision.

2. *ALLOW MILITARY MEMBERS TO ENROLL IN THE MGIB LATER DURING THEIR CAREERS THAN AT BASIC TRAINING*. The one-time opportunity at Basic Training is a problem as explained above. We recommend allowing members to enroll later. Perhaps, allow them to enroll at any time during their first enlistment. Or (if there must be an enrollment fee)

charge them \$1,200 if they enroll any time in their first four years of service; \$1,500 between the fourth and tenth years of service; \$1,800 between ten and 15 years of service; and \$2,000 between the fifteenth and twentieth year of service. Those numbers are only an example to show how the enrollment cost could be scaled to reflect enrollment entry point. We urge you to work to either waive the enrollment fee, or to offer enrollment later in careers (when members are better able to financially handle enrollment). While Rep. Jones' H.R. 2020 provision to spread out the \$1,200 enrollment fee over the first two years of service is an improvement, a later enrollment opportunity would be fairer and more beneficial. Under H.R. 2020's 24-month payment plan, the Basic Trainee enrollee would *still* be faced with this financial decision under the pressure of Basic Training when they are making the least. Allowing them a later enrollment decision makes more sense, financially, for the member.

3. *TEN-YEAR BENEFIT LOSS CLOCK*. Once an MGIB enrollee separates or retires, he/she has ten years to use their benefit or they lose any unused portion. The early years of a military career are pretty much consumed with initial entry and skill-level training, mastering the job, certifying, etc. Similarly, transitioning to civilian life includes a time of retraining, readjusting and certification. For many, using their earned educational benefit (for which they paid \$1,200), must be delayed a few years. However, the clock is ticking as the benefit gets ready to be taken away. We urge that the ten-year clock be increased to 15 or 20 years, or that the "benefit-loss" provision be repealed. In a very real sense, if the benefit has been earned through military service, and the federal mechanism that tracks the program is not earmarked to go away, we don't believe it would be a problem to extend or eliminate the 10-year benefit loss clock.

4. *"PORTABILITY" OF MGIB TO FAMILY MEMBERS*. While we appreciate the intent of the "portability" feature signed into law in the FY2002 NDAA, we urge that the benefit feature be extended to all MGIB enrollees. For enlisted members, in particular, it could mean the ability to offer a good college educational opportunity to their children. If we are wise, we could also make it a good retention tool across the board. Perhaps offer the option to transfer (at least a portion of) the benefit to family members once the individual has served 12 to 15 years. This would make the option available in time to help send their kids to college, and it would serve as an incentive to stay in the service. Please work to afford the "portability" option across the board to military enrollees (enlisted ones in particular).

5. *ALLOW NEW MILITARY MEMBERS TO USE THEIR MGIB BENEFIT TO PAY OFF OUTSTANDING STUDENT LOANS*. Several association members have asked for the ability to use their Montgomery G.I. Bill benefit to pay off student loans that they carry with them into military service. We believe that this would be a good recruiting tool. If they use their MGIB for this purpose, it would cost them a proportional part of their overall MGIB benefit.

MEDICAL CARE

Without question, the health care system administered by the Veterans Administration impacts, in one way or another, those who served. I wish to briefly touch on some issues that have been reflected in the many phone calls we have received from the field. Of course, we tend to hear most loudly and frequently from those who are not happy with the adjudication of their claims or the treatment they have received. I am not going to go into isolated problems, because anecdotal information is just that. Rather, I want to briefly touch, instead, on some specific health-related situations that need to be addressed.

PROVIDE A FULL CONTINUUM OF CARE. There must be mandated access to VA health care for all veterans. All honorably discharged veterans must have the full continuum of care – mandated by law. This provision of care should also apply to career veterans -- our military retirees.

SUPPORT VA SUBVENTION. VA-Medicare subvention is very promising, and we offer full support for this effort. The VA has an infra-structural network to handle this, so we anticipate the effort would be successful. Under this plan, Medicare would reimburse the VA for care the VA provides to non-disabled Medicare-eligible veterans at VA medical facilities. This is an opportunity to ensure that those who served are not lumped in with all those who never chose to do so, and will no doubt save taxpayer dollars.

SUPPORT VA-DOD SHARING ARRANGEMENTS. An excellent example of DoD-VA health care cooperation is at Nellis AFB in Nevada. The integration/sharing of facility and resources is a smart business practice and, at the same time, promises more care opportunities for this nation's servicemembers and veterans. This decision represents a good, common sense approach *at some locations*; at these places, this promises to eliminate problems of inconsistency, save time, and take care of our veterans in a more timely manner. Our only caveat would be that DoD beneficiary participation in VA facilities must never endanger the scope or availability of care for our traditional VA patients, nor should any VA-DoD sharing arrangement jeopardize access and/or treatment of DoD health services beneficiaries.

FOCUS ON THE WELFARE OF THE VETERAN. While the VA's drive to save money by reducing its expenses and engaging in privatization efforts is understandable, we caution the VA that these reductions must not be the overriding target. The end goal must be full care and treatment of veterans. Participation in other avenues of revenue generation tends to cause focus on a bottom line. The "bottom line" in this system should be the welfare of the veteran.

EXPAND HEALTH CARE OPPORTUNITIES. The VA image in the minds of many is that it is there to serve only paupers. This image and the underlying reality must be upgraded. The VA health care system is viewed as needing significant improvement in terms of the quality of facilities and equipment, services offered, and patient treatment.. In this sense, AFSA believes there needs to be a full national commitment toward expanded health care opportunities for all veterans.

PROVIDE LONG-TERM CARE. The VA must be fully funded to provide for long-term care including nursing home care; care for chronically mentally ill veterans; and home care aid, support and services. While landmark legislation that was passed last year took us a great deal closer to this end, it will only happen if adequate, earmarked, consistent funding is identified.

CARE FOR WOMEN VETERANS. Another dimension of this nation's veterans' demographics that has significantly increased in recent years is the number of women who serve. The VA must be funded to increasingly provide the resources and legal authority to care for women, to include obstetric services and after-birth care for the mother and child.

GENERAL ISSUES

SPEEDIER PROCESSING. We hear from a great deal of veterans complaining that their claims (and original decisions, for that matter) take a very long period of time. We applaud the Veterans Administration for progress made toward the reduction in the time required to process claims and adjudicate appeals. Recently, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs announced a record number of claims handled without an increase in the required time. It clearly appears that Secretary Principi and his staff are committed to continue this progress on this matter. *AFSA urges this Congress to provide the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) with additional manning and funding to allow quality and timely administration of compensation and pension claims.* The VA must continue to dedicate itself to improving its ability to process benefits claims with accuracy and in a timely fashion.

HOMELESS VETS. We applaud these committees for the landmark legislation that came out of the first session of this Congress. Your decisions were fair and balanced, and we support your efforts. Your work acknowledged that many veterans are homeless as a result of paying a tremendous price for serving their nation. We fully endorse your demonstration that it is important that we expend an extra effort to assist this group of citizens.

LEGITIMATE, SINCERE VETERANS PREFERENCE. Over the last few years you have made great strides toward making "Veterans' Preference" a reality. We urge these committees to continue to support any improvement that will put "teeth" into such programs so that those who have served have a leg up when transitioning back into the civilian workforce.

ELIMINATE HOME LOAN FEES. The best way to attract new veterans to use this valuable benefit is to *eliminate fees and make the program as attractive as possible.* However, if other home loan programs are made available, liberal qualification criteria and *the "no down payment" feature should be maintained for all sources.*

MAKE THE RESERVE HOME LOAN PERMANENT. For our reserve component members, *the Selected Reserve Home Loan Program entitlement should be permanently extended.* Those members who serve in the Guard and Reserve deserve full, year-round benefits. The concept of “weekend warriors” is certainly an unfair, inaccurate misnomer. Our nation owes them a great deal, the least of which is provision of a full benefits package for their service. We ask these committees to endorse making the program permanent.

Mr. Chairman, In conclusion, I thank you for this opportunity to present the views of the Air Force enlisted community. Your decisions on priorities to be weighed for the FY 2003 budget will weigh many factors. AFSA sincerely believes that the work these House and Senate committees do is among the most important done on the Hill. Year after year, Congress after Congress, the House and Senate VA Committees have illustrated the value of non-political cooperation with *the full focus of your efforts on the well-being of those serving this nation.* This annual joint hearing illustrates your noble approach. Your job is not only to protect and reward those who served; it is to demonstrate to those currently serving (and those who someday will serve) that this nation portion of their lives to their nation. no small measure due to their members, we appreciate your efforts in matters of mutual concern.



is committed to honor those who give a After all, this nation’s prosperity is in selfless efforts. On behalf of all AFSA and, as always, are ready to support you

